

A summer camp for teachers who study the region's past

By Will Hobson
For The Inquirer



During a day trip to Philadelphia, teachers attending the Valley Forge Teacher's Institute hear a talk from historian Anna Cox Toogood.

While their students were off at summer camps, relaxing poolside, or at the Jersey Shore, 21 teachers gathered at Valley Forge National Historical Park last week to take part in a summer camp of their own, one that would strengthen their abilities to teach history in today's classroom.

The Valley Forge Teacher's Institute brought historical authors Thomas Fleming and Gary Nash in to speak with the teachers this year, headlining a group of local college professors.

In addition to time spent at lectures, the teachers were given guided tours of the park, and spent a day hitting the historical hotspots of Philadelphia.

"We want to capitalize on the history that is local, but has national implications," said Barbara Pollarine, deputy superintendent of the park. "We want to acquaint teachers with how to use primary documents, museum collections, and online resources to enhance and augment what they have in the classroom . . . To have teachers come to the understanding that national parks are open, living classrooms."

The theme for this year's institute, "It's Everybody's Revolution," was drawn from recent books authored by Fleming and Nash. Fleming's *Everybody's Revolution* and Nash's *The Unknown American Revolution* both shed light on the often overlooked part that women, African Americans, and Native Americans played in the birth of America.

"When you go in the classroom today, you want everyone to understand that it's their history," said Dolores Narcisi, second grade teacher at Valley Forge Elementary School in the Tredyffrin-Easttown School District.

"The story of the African American patriot is part of a bigger picture. The Continental Congress, Ben Franklin in France, these are all part of a bigger picture," she said.

The prominent speakers and the historically rich locale drew teachers from as far as Texas, Missouri, and Florida to take part in the camp, which is federally funded and provided a \$200 stipend to each teacher, helping defray travel costs, or money given up by those who took a week off from their summer jobs.

"The two women from Missouri, on the first day said to me, 'Are we actually going to see Independence Hall?' I said absolutely, and they were so excited, which is something that we up here take for granted," said Pollarine.

Beverly Gordon, a history teacher at Malvern Preparatory School, ran a session about online resources that gave the teachers a list of Web sites and online databases that can help them expand their teaching through the Internet.

"We are up against video games, and computer games all the time, but when the students are able to engage in a medium that they are used to for entertainment, and use it for education, that's great," said Gordon, who draws her knowledge in online resources from her previous career, working in museums.

The institute satisfied Act 48 continuing education requirements for Pennsylvania teachers, and the out-of-staters were given certificates at the end of the week to help with similar requirements back home.

More important than the pieces of paper, though, were the lessons learned, the knowledge that will help these teachers teach more than the simple rote memorization of names, places and dates.

"As a teacher, you don't want to teach dates, you want to let students see how things happened, and not ignore human nature," said Narcisi. "It's not just a story, it's real people that existed."